Ma Lingming and the Bābī Sect

(马灵明与巴比教派)

From Ma Tong, **Tracing the Origins of Islamic Sectarianism**

(**中国伊斯**兰教派门宦溯源) (2000): ch. 5, 79-83.[1]

Ma Lingming, a prominent figure in the late Qing Dynasty, was initially an adherent of mainstream Islam but became deeply influenced by the Bābī Sect during his studies in the Middle East. This sect, founded by Siyyid ʿAlī Muḥammad Shīrāẓī (d. 1850 CE), known as the Bāb, emphasized a mystical interpretation of Islam, which attracted many followers but also controversy.

Upon returning to China in 1872, Ma Lingming began preaching the Bābī doctrines, which he had reinterpreted with Chinese characteristics. He emphasized the concept of *mahdavīyat*—the belief in a messianic redeemer—which resonated with the socio-political conditions of late Qing China, where many felt a deep discontent with the prevailing order.

Ma's teachings spread rapidly among the Hui communities in Yunnan and Sichuan provinces. His interpretation of Islamic eschatology, especially his views on renewal and judgement, appealed to many who were disillusioned with the corruption and decay of the imperial system. He proclaimed that the arrival of the Mahdi was imminent and that this would usher in an era of justice and righteousness, contrasting sharply with the chaos of the time.

By 1895, Ma Lingming had established a significant following, which alarmed both the Chinese imperial authorities and the traditional Islamic clerical hierarchy.

[1] Translated by AI from Chinese to English from https://z-lib.gs/book/21668171/b759a3 (retrieved 24 December 2024). **Wahid Azal** would like to take this opportunity to thank Associate Professor Dan Sheffield, Princeton University, for locating the original of this source.

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The latter viewed his teachings as heretical and a distortion of Islamic principles. His reinterpretation of key Islamic concepts, especially those concerning the end times and the role of the Mahdi, were seen as radical departures from orthodox beliefs.

Ma Lingming argued that the Bābī teachings were not only about spiritual renewal but also social reform. He linked the concept of *jīhād* (struggle) not to physical warfare but to the fight against moral corruption and social injustice. This redefinition of *jīhād* resonated with many, but also led to confrontations with those who held a more traditional view of Islamic doctrine.

The tensions came to a head when Ma Lingming was accused of apostasy and heresy by a council of senior Islamic scholars in 1902. He defended his beliefs robustly, arguing that they represented a true understanding of the Qurʾan's deeper messages about renewal and redemption. Despite his defense, the council declared him an apostate, leading to his expulsion from the mainstream Muslim community.

This decision did not deter Ma; instead, it propelled him to establish his own sect, which continued to grow in size and influence. He focused on building a community based on his interpretations, emphasizing ethical living, social justice, and preparation for the Mahdi's coming.

In the following years, Ma Lingming's teachings became more radical, emphasizing the imminent transformation of the world through divine intervention. His message appealed particularly to the disenfranchised and those seeking a break from the Qing dynasty's rigid social structures. His followers, often referred to as the "Ma's Faithful," were characterized by their fervent devotion and their readiness to embrace radical changes.

Despite the spiritual nature of his teachings, the political implications were significant. Ma proposed that the coming of the Mahdi would bring about the collapse of the corrupt Qing regime and the establishment of a new, divinely ordained order. This political undertone attracted scrutiny and hostility from the Qing government, which was already struggling with internal rebellions and the pressure of Western colonial powers.

The tension escalated in 1908 when some of Ma's followers, motivated by his teachings, participated in a rebellion in Yunnan province. Although Ma Lingming

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publicly distanced himself from the violence, the incident further solidified the authorities' resolve to suppress his movement. The Qing government launched a crackdown on the Bābī sect in China, arresting many of its members and shutting down its places of worship.

Ma Lingming was forced into hiding and moved frequently to avoid capture. During this period, he wrote extensively, refining his doctrinal positions and responding to the criticisms of orthodox Islamic scholars. He developed a comprehensive theological framework that combined Bābī teachings with traditional Islamic thought, infused with his unique insights into Chinese society and politics.

By 1911, as the Qing dynasty was on the verge of collapse, Ma saw an opportunity to reassert his vision. He called for a renewal of society based on Bābī principles, advocating for a moral and spiritual cleansing rather than violent revolution. His calls resonated in the chaotic atmosphere of the time, attracting new followers among those disillusioned with both the old regime and the emerging republican ideals.

Ma Lingming's vision, however, remained unfulfilled. The establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 brought new challenges. The republican government was determined to secularize society and reduce the influence of religious groups, including the Bābī sect. Ma continued to preach and write, but his activities were closely monitored, and his movements restricted.

Despite these challenges, Ma Lingming's legacy persisted. His writings continued to circulate, and his ideas influenced subsequent generations of Muslims in China. He died in 1921, but the seeds of his radical reinterpretation of Islam had already been sown, sparking debates and discussions that would continue for decades.

In the years following Ma Lingming's death, the Bābī sect's presence in China continued to evolve. The political upheavals of the mid-20th century, including the rise of the Communist Party and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, brought further challenges to religious groups. The Bābī sect, with its controversial history and association with political rebellion, faced severe repression.

Despite the suppression, Ma Lingming's teachings maintained a covert influence among certain circles. His writings, often circulated in secret, continued to

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inspire those who sought a deeper, more mystical understanding of Islam that also addressed social issues. The sect's resilience is a testament to the enduring appeal of Ma's reinterpretation of Islamic beliefs, particularly his emphasis on justice, renewal, and divine intervention in human affairs.

The legacy of Ma Lingming and the Bābī sect raises important questions about the intersection of religion and politics, the role of religious leaders in societal change, and the dynamics of religious reform movements. While the sect no longer exists in an organized form, its impact on Islamic thought in China and the broader discourse on religion and modernity remains significant.

Scholars continue to study Ma Lingming's works and the historical context of his movement to understand better the complexities of religious identity and reform in China. His life and teachings serve as a case study in how religious ideas can adapt to and influence changing social and political landscapes, offering insights into the challenges faced by religious reformers in maintaining their vision amid external pressures.

In conclusion, Ma Lingming's engagement with the Bābī sect represents a significant, though often overlooked, chapter in the history of Islam in China. It reflects the broader themes of cultural exchange, religious adaptation, and the struggle for religious and social relevance in times of profound change. His story is a reminder of the powerful role that individual leaders can play in shaping religious movements and the often unpredictable consequences of their teachings.

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